



# HPV

(Human Papillomavirus)



**Answers to your questions  
about HPV  
and how it is treated**





## What is HPV?

HPV is short for Human Papillomavirus. It is a virus that lives on the skin and sometimes causes warts. There are many different kinds and they are spread by skin-to-skin contact with someone who has HPV. Some are passed on mostly through vaginal, oral or anal sex. It is very contagious, and even people with no visible warts can spread the virus to others.

HPV is a very common sexually transmitted disease (STD). Half of all sexually active people will get a genital HPV infection at some point in their lives. Young women are especially at risk. The younger a woman is when she starts having sex and the more partners she has, the more likely she is to get genital HPV. By age 50, at least 80% of women will have had a genital HPV infection.

There are more than 100 types of HPV. Some are called “high-risk” types, and may cause abnormal Pap tests. They may also lead to cancer of the cervix, vulva, vagina, anus or penis. Others are called “low-risk” types and they may cause mild Pap test abnormalities or genital warts.

Fortunately, a vaccine is now available that prevents the four most common types of HPV. This includes the two “high-risk” types that are most associated with cancer. It is only given to females at this time but may soon be available for men. The vaccine is available for females between the ages of 9 and 26; the recommended





ages are 11 or 12. Girls should get the vaccine before they are likely to become sexually active. It can also be helpful for women who have already had sex because they may not have been exposed to one of the “high-risk” types of HPV.

The vaccine is three separate shots given a few months apart. Unfortunately, because it is very new, the vaccine can be very expensive. In Washington state, some people can qualify for a free vaccine. If you think you might qualify, you can talk to your doctor or call your local health department for information.

Very few women who have HPV will ever develop cancer, but any sexually active woman should have regular Pap tests to check for any abnormal cells on her cervix. These cells can be removed and can keep any cancer from growing.

### **What are the signs and symptoms?**

HPV is one of the STDs that frequently do not have visible symptoms, especially for women. Even if there are warts, they may be in a place that is not visible. It is important to remember that HPV can be spread even if you don't see any warts.

Genital warts can appear any time from a few weeks to a couple of years after having sex with an infected partner. They are similar to other warts—bumps that vary in size and shape. When they appear on dry skin, the warts are usually hard and grayish. They frequently occur in groups but can also be single warts. When





they appear in moist areas like the vagina, they are usually soft and pink or white and may resemble cauliflower in shape.

The types of HPV that cause visible warts are not the same types of HPV associated with cancer.

Men can get genital warts on the penis, the scrotum and inside the urethra (the tube that carries urine out of the body). Women can get genital warts inside the vagina, the outer areas of the genitals and on the cervix. Both males and females can get them in the anal area.

The warts are not usually painful, although they can be itchy. If they are in an area that is rubbed by clothing, there can be some discomfort, especially if the warts are large.

### **How is HPV tested?**

There are a couple of laboratory tests that can be performed to diagnose HPV. However, HPV is usually diagnosed through observation of visible warts or an abnormal Pap test. If a woman has an abnormal Pap, her doctor may do more tests to see if she has HPV.

### **What about Pap tests?**

All sexually active women should have regular Pap tests to check for abnormal cell growth on the cervix. The cervix is the bottom part of the uterus that is at the top of vagina. A Pap test doesn't hurt. It involves using a swab to remove



a few cells from the cervix. The swab will then be sent to a laboratory for testing.

There are many, many causes for abnormal cell growth. One of the more common causes is HPV.

If your doctor tells you that you have an abnormal Pap, don't panic. He or she may want to do more tests or will often just tell you to come back in a few months for another Pap test. Usually the abnormal cells will just go away. If they don't, there are several ways to treat them.

The important thing is to see your health care provider regularly—usually once a year. Take your doctor's advice about how often you should go.

### How is HPV treated?

Because HPV is a virus it cannot be cured, only treated. However, HPV doesn't always need treatment because the body will often clear the infection on its own, whether the warts are visible or not. It is unclear if this is permanent because there have been cases where people seemed to have rid themselves of HPV only to have the infection reappear.

If the warts are large and uncomfortable, there are several methods for removal. The most common way is by freezing the warts with liquid nitrogen. The wart then dies and falls off. There is also a medicine that the doctor will apply to the warts to remove them. Your doctor

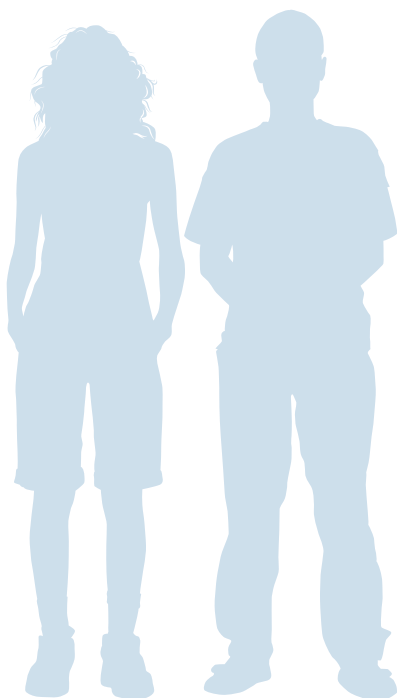




may also give you a gel or cream that you can apply at home and then wash off later. Some of these medicines should not be used if you are pregnant because they can cause birth defects. Be sure to tell your doctor if you are pregnant.

When the warts are especially large, surgery may be needed to remove them. Laser surgery is becoming more common for treatment of large genital warts.

It is important to remember that these treatments only remove the warts; they do not kill the virus that causes the warts. Even after treatment, many people will get warts again.





## How can HPV be prevented?

**Don't have sex.** Abstinence is the surest way to avoid getting HPV.

**Be faithful.** Have sex with only one other person whom you trust. Sexual fidelity with someone who is not infected means that you won't get herpes from them and, if you're not infected, they won't get it from you.

**Use condoms.** They aren't 100% effective, but if you choose to have sex, latex condoms can be a good protection against HPV as long as the condom covers any visible warts. Learn how to use condoms correctly and use a new one every time you have sex.

**Get vaccinated** if you are between the ages of 9 and 26. If you are a parent, have your daughters vaccinated. The vaccine is available through your doctor's office or at many local health clinics. Girls should be vaccinated before they are sexually active, but it can be helpful even after they start having sex.

**Don't mix drugs and alcohol with sex.** Getting drunk or high can affect your ability to make smart decisions about sex.

**Have fewer partners.** The more people you have sex with, the greater your chances of getting HPV.





If you have questions or need more  
information, call your doctor, local health  
department or clinic.

Or call the  
**STD National Hotline**  
**1-800-227-8922**



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